

The Ohio State University

Commencement Speech

March 18, 2007

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Thank You.

President Holbrook, Provost Snyder, members of the Board of Trustees, distinguished guests, colleagues, parents, loved ones and friends of our graduating students, and soon-to-be graduates.

Graduates, I congratulate you warmly for this great milestone in your lives. You will probably look back on these 4, 5, 6 or 7 years as among your best times. You are privileged people, among the 25% of American adults who have college degrees and among the 1% or less of your fellow humans who have achieved this. Be proud, but don't forget the responsibility that your education imposes on you.

I was surprised—perhaps some of you were also surprised-- when President Holbrook asked me to deliver this commencement address. In my 35 years at Ohio State, I have regarded myself as a mere spear-carrier in the battle against ignorance—some people behind me carry academic howitzers. When my surprise passed, I was reminded of a favorite cartoon. A short, balding, chubby middle-aged

man (I identify with him) is sitting in a comfortable chair and saying to no one in particular “I have gained some wisdom in my life, but nobody seems to want it”.

Today I have an unexpected opportunity to impart wisdom to a captive audience. But I wavered about what I should say. I have ten laws—Lynch’s laws—that I have kept closely guarded for years. For instance, the sixth law warns that “at one meal, never eat anything bigger than your own head”. My wife Ann, my most valued advisor, cautioned me that the ten laws were not the road I should take.

I then did what historians love to do---research. Dr. Raimond Goerler, curator of the University’s archives, sent me a copy of the graduation program for 1907. Two hundred and eighty students graduated in 1907, about 20% of them women. In 1907 commencement was preceded in 1907 by three busy days. At the baccalaureate service in the Chapel, there was an overflow crowd, some of whom had to be turned away. Dr. David Phillipson of the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati spoke at considerable length on topics that still agitate people: “God and the Universe, life and death, the soul and its future, duty and destiny”. In short, he discussed whether science and religion can coexist. He thought that they could coexist. On Class Day, students delivered speeches, read poetry, made prophecies, and gave a class gift of \$1101.33 to purchase chimes. A ball game between faculty and senior students capped the Class Day festivities—I assume baseball: football

was not yet king. On Alumni Day, the alumni did their business. At Commencement on June 19<sup>th</sup>, 1907, Ohio's Governor Andrew Harris, Ohio State's President William Oxley Thompson, whose impressive statue stands in front of the main library, and the Trustees led the academic procession to the Chapel. A historian, Professor Edwin Earle Sparks, class of 1884, delivered the commencement address. He spoke at great length about President Rutherford B. Hayes, an Ohio native, three-time Governor of Ohio and President of the United States. Hayes Hall on the oval is named for the president. After four days of fun, music, processions and long speeches, the graduates received their degrees.

The graduates of 1907, born in the 1880s, had a life expectancy of about 40 more years, until they were roughly 60. Let us exercise our historical imaginations and look briefly at their 40<sup>th</sup> reunion in 1947. I assume that in their personal lives they had had happiness and sadness—everyone does. But in those 40 years they had lived through remarkable developments, most of which I have no time even to mention. Some developments were better than others. When they were in their 30s, World War I broke out; when they were in their late 30s and early 40s they enjoyed the false prosperity of the 1920s; when they were in their late forties and early fifties they experienced the Great Depression; and when they were in their fifties, World War II dominated their lives, even on the home front. Some of them lived into the remarkable prosperity of post-war America. They also lived through

remarkable medical and scientific such as insulin and penicillin that saved millions of lives; they enjoyed labor-saving devices and above all the automobile which became available to the masses; they might have recognized the stirrings of the civil rights movement and the women's movement. But on those four days in 1907, I suspect that they had no inkling that these changes and many others were coming.

Their experience is relevant for you and the rest of us. Forgive me for assuming how old you are. Our society has opened formal education to every age—a liberating development. But I assume that most graduates today were born in the 1980s. You male graduates can expect to live about 52 more years; you female graduates can expect to live about 59 more years---it is not guaranteed of course. Now let us turn our historical imaginations to your fortieth reunion in 2047. You will have experienced happiness and sadness, but beyond that, I do not know what your collective future will be---no one knows. I think that you, like the Class of 1907, are going to face challenges and experience progress, some which seem obvious to us now but others are totally unforeseen.

We live in the most analyzed and commented upon period in human history. The analysts and commentators vigorously disagree with one another, so we hear a lot of yelling. To stand out in the herd, some analysts turn to hype and exaggeration. Their analysis of the present and the future is often quite gloomy. Let us take the word “crisis”. When I entered the word “crisis” in the Ohio State

Library database, I received 15,726 titles; when I entered it in the website of the online book seller, Amazon, I received 250,420 hits. To judge from book titles, we are in a sea of crises. Calvin Coolidge, not one of our great presidents but the possessor of a dry New England Yankee wit, once said that “if you see ten troubles coming down the road, you can be sure that nine will run into the ditch before they reach you”. Coolidge did not allude to the unforeseen troubles around the bend in the road. The challenge for you and your generation will be to decide which crises are real and what actions they demand from you.

What troubles occupy our attention now? Let’s start big, with the earth itself. The sources of global warming remain somewhat controversial, but the earth’s temperature is rising. The implications of a warming earth seem staggering. Massive migrations of people fleeing rising water; economic shifts as some areas benefit and others suffer. This crisis is motivating some of our contemporaries to be thrifty with our use of energy. Florescent light bulbs, higher auto mileage, recycling, searches for new sources of energy and other measures should certainly be adopted. But if the earth continues to warm, you will live your lives in ways very different from what you now think is normal—2047 will be dramatically unlike 2007.

Demographic changes are also underway. Aging, even shrinking, populations in the United States and Europe will confront growing populations in

much of the less developed world. That could bring in massive cultural and political shifts. We in Ohio are acutely aware that economic changes are also in motion—manufacturing jobs are disappearing at an alarming rate. Our society is also experiencing dramatic changes in the ways that adults relate to one another, in the ways that our fellow citizens marry or don't marry, in the ways that parents interact with children. I can't even formulate a guess about how those demographic, economic and social changes will have turned out by 2047.

Your future is also full of promise, much of it unforeseen. Health problems that plague so many will perhaps be significantly mitigated or even cured by 2047. The amazing technological advances of the last century may continue during your life time. In the tradition of American adaptability and optimism, your generation may find ways to cope with global warming, aging populations, economic shifts and social changes.

Now that I have broken many rules of commencement speeches by dwelling on problems, I shall change my direction. Let me recalculate your life expectancies in a rough way. You female graduates have about 21500 days and you male graduates have about 19000 days with which to make your life. You have some control—but just some-- over how you use those days. I hope that I don't need to tell you to seek personal happiness and professional success. Beyond those, try to

prepare yourself for inevitable, often unexpected, and sometimes uncontrollable change, some of which you will welcome and some of which you won't.

Your education at Ohio State had two large components, a major and a general education. You usually identify yourself by your major—"I majored in Electrical Engineering or French". I hope that the Ohio State University has prepared you to earn your bread. But you are more than your job. The Ohio State University can be proud that it has thus far maintained the structures of an undergraduate liberal education, an education intended to liberate people from the narrow world of their immediate experience. Such a view of the purposes of education has a long history, going back to the ancient Greeks. Pressure for ever more specialized undergraduate training threatens it, but it hangs on. Sometimes eagerly, sometimes with a sigh of resignation, sometimes kicking and screaming, you have studied a mix of mathematics, the biological and physical sciences, the social and behavioral sciences, the humanities, foreign languages, the arts and even history. That part of your education has given you a foundation for coping with whatever your future holds. Your liberal education did not teach you everything, an impossible task. But it moved you toward what I regard as important personal goals that I shall call intellectual and moral autonomy, toward the ability to make judgments based on facts not prejudgments, to separate hype from fact, and to ask yourself constantly "what does my experience mean?", "Why are things the way

they are?” “Do they have to be that way”? Your privileged education in a major and in general learning can enable you to be a good citizen with an inquiring mind whose interests are broad and whose values are well thought out and honest.

Your quest for intellectual autonomy can not end today, when you receive your degree. You are merely beginning—commencing---a life-long journey. Only through experience and reflection on that experience can you gain a liberating understanding of yourself, of the narrow world right around you, and of the rich world that extends back in time, across geography, across cultures, and out into the universe itself. Each of us lives in a world flooded with so-called facts, covered with a thick coating of hooey, of hype, of error. You need to read widely, but also with skepticism so that you can guard against hype and hooey and misleading books. Your general education can help you, but only if you pursue it for life. The effort to achieve intellectual adulthood is well worth it---you will have a richer life for it and you will be better able to cope the unforeseen.

You also need to strive for moral autonomy, moral adulthood. Use your quota of days to promote fairness, kindness, compassion, and justice. Find some need that lifts you, liberates, you from the personal/professional/private aspects of your life. Commit your money and your energy to the needs--- or maybe just a need--- of the society in which we live. I can only mention a sample of the broad range of needs---museums, education, religious institutions, soup kitchens, decent



housing, effective politics, school volunteering, concern for neighbors. There is much more need than there is help. Your efforts can close that gap between need and help, if only a little.

Today University awards you both your well-deserved diploma and your symbolic spear to defend reason against unreason, to defend evidence against closed minds or outright lies, to promote kindness against indifference and hostility, and to promote in our public life civility against noisy ranting and lies.

Thank you for your patience, congratulations for your achievement. Do not let this happy day pass without saying out loud the word “thanks” to those who helped you reach this moment. Good luck in your pursuit of intellectual autonomy and moral adulthood.